

**Eye on  
Endemics:  
A Closer  
Look at Our  
Local Bird  
Heritage**

**by Mark Yokoyama**



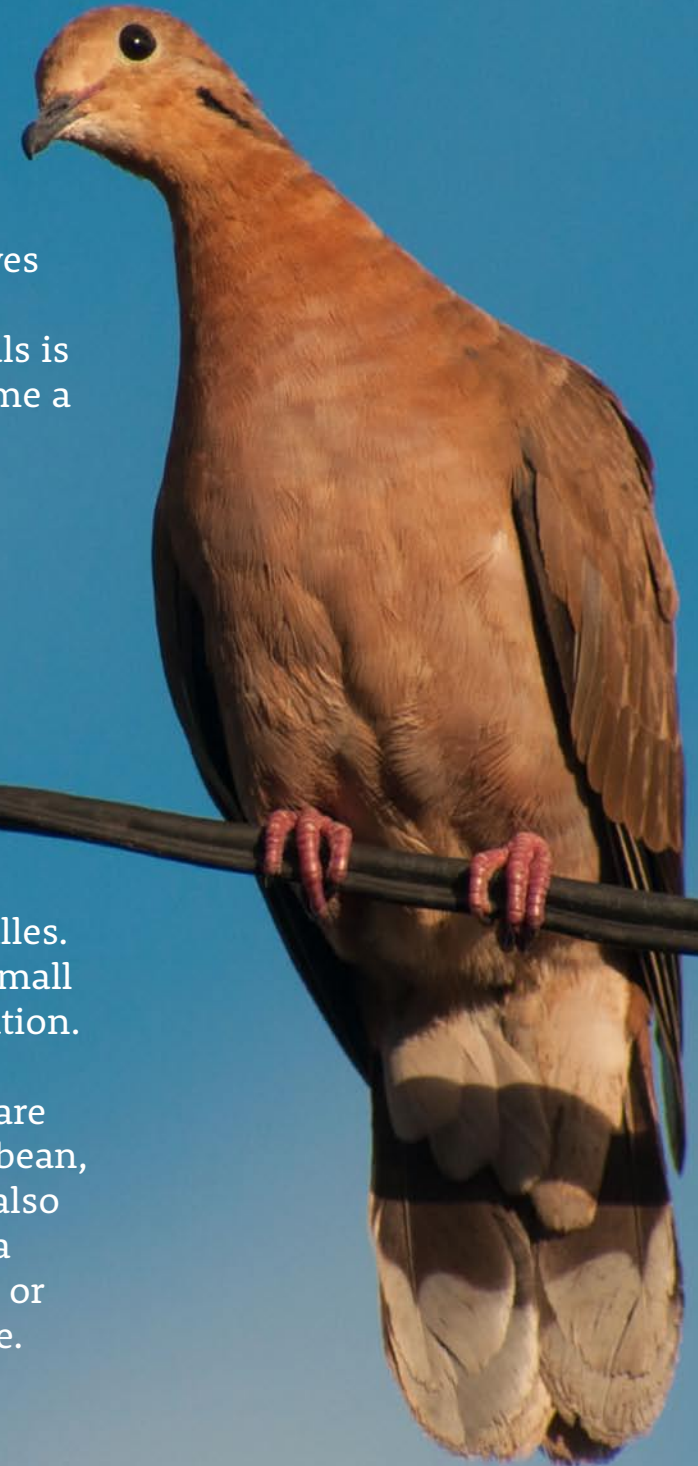


# What Are Our Endemic Birds?

Endemic is a term that is often used in biology to describe animals and plants that are native to, and found only in, a specific area. For example, the Bearded Anole is a lizard that is found only on St. Martin, so it would be considered endemic to St. Martin. (Of course, this refers to St. Martin and Sint Maarten, since the animals themselves don't differentiate between the north and south parts of the island!) Endemic species often occur on islands, where a population of animals is isolated from its ancestors and adapts to the local conditions to become a distinct species.

On our island, identifying our endemic birds is a bit more nuanced. Although there are many birds in the Caribbean which live only on a single island, they are primarily in the Greater Antilles, with a few in the larger islands of the Lesser Antilles. There are no bird species found only on St. Martin, because it is too small and too close to other islands for new species to develop here in isolation.

However, we are home to many regionally-endemic birds: birds that are unique to our region. Some of these birds are found only in the Caribbean, or part of the Caribbean. Others are primarily Caribbean species that also live in some mainland areas bordering the Caribbean. There are also a number of birds that are more widespread, but have specific varieties or subspecies in our region that are different than populations elsewhere.

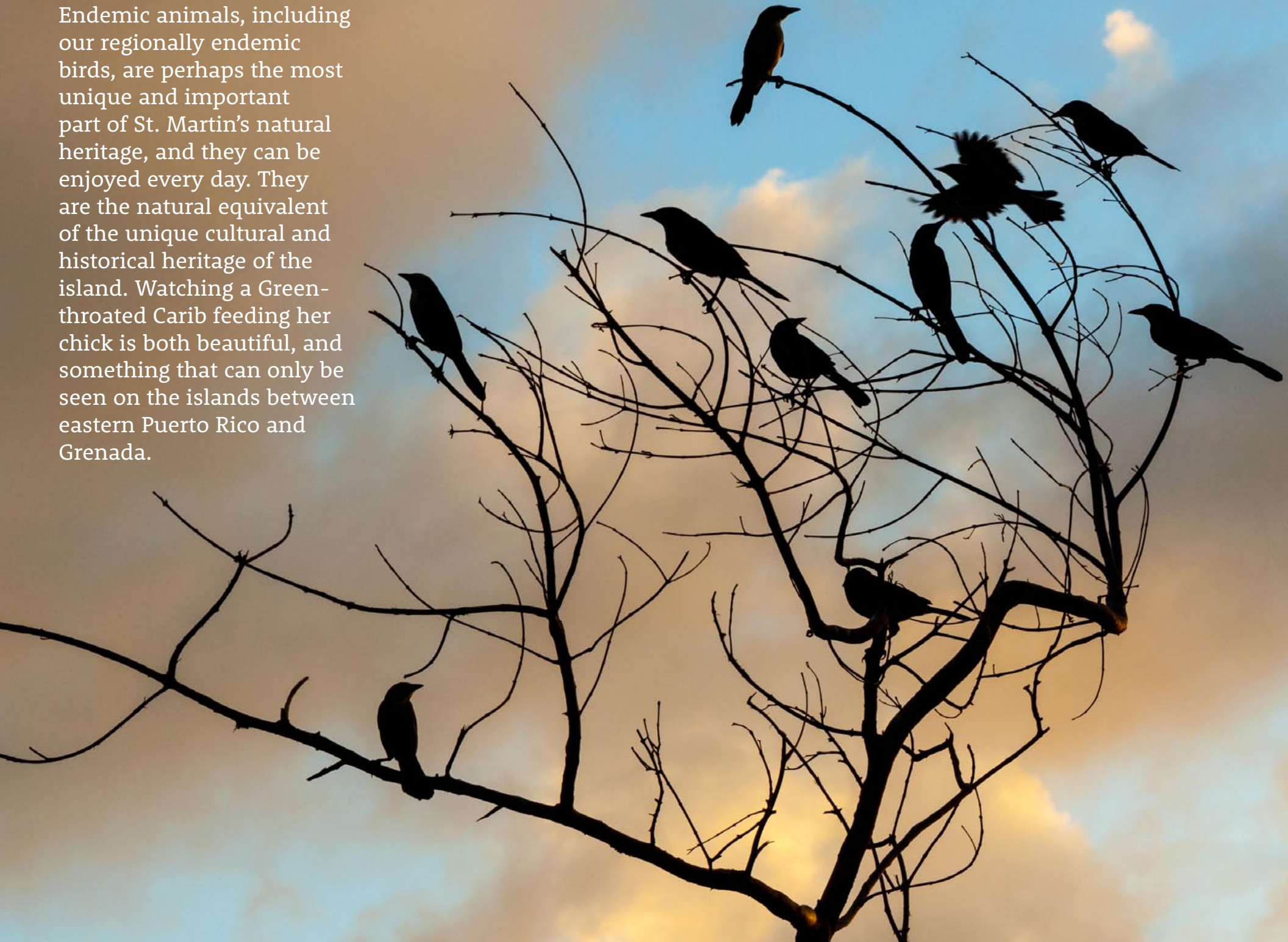


These regionally-endemic birds may be unique to the Caribbean, but happily, many of them are among the most familiar birds we see around the island. Our two hummingbirds, for example, are both endemic to the Caribbean, primarily the Lesser Antilles. The Zenaida Dove, often known here as the Mountain Dove, is found only in the Caribbean and a small part of the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico. The common ground dove and American Kestrel (Killy-killy) have large ranges, including much of North America, but in both cases the subspecies found here is limited to just a small part of the Caribbean.





Endemic animals, including our regionally endemic birds, are perhaps the most unique and important part of St. Martin's natural heritage, and they can be enjoyed every day. They are the natural equivalent of the unique cultural and historical heritage of the island. Watching a Green-throated Carib feeding her chick is both beautiful, and something that can only be seen on the islands between eastern Puerto Rico and Grenada.



# The Sugar Bird: A Mystery Among Us



The sugar bird is small, but known to all on St. Martin. It is brazen in its pursuit of sugar and other sweet foods, and familiar enough to have a number of names, including: Bananaquit, Yellowbreast and Sucrier. Its screeching voice can be heard from beach to town to hillside, and its spherical nests hang from trees all over the island.

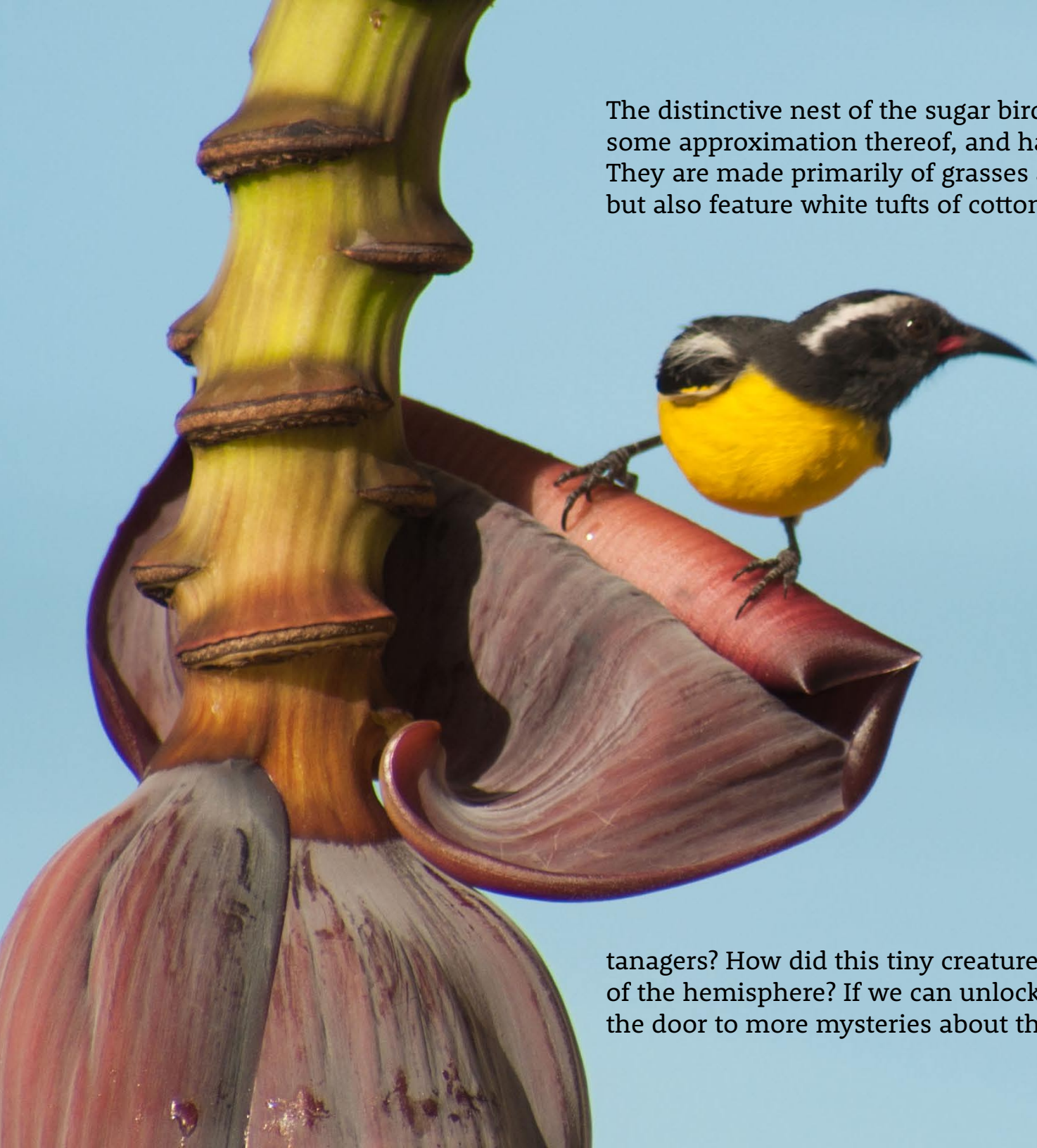
Although highly visible, this familiar bird has a mysterious past. No one knows its exact relationship to other birds. Some experts place it in the tanager family, for lack of a better home, while for others it is in a family of its own, Coerebidae. Even alone, this species makes a fine family, with over 40 subspecies and a range that extends from South America to the occasional sighting in Florida.



Traveling throughout the range of the sugar bird, one would find many variations in their appearance. In Grenada, they appear in two forms, one similar to ours and one that is almost completely black. While ours have a gray throat, several other subspecies have a white throat, or even a white forehead. In the Caribbean, the sugar bird has pink flesh at the base of its bill (known as the gape flange), but this is typically not prominent in other areas. Perhaps some of these regional variations will help scientists understand where this species evolved.



While we may not understand its origins, we do know a great deal about the life history of the sugar bird. In the wild, they feed primarily on nectar, but also eat fruit and insects. In urban areas, they are quick to take sugar or sweet drinks that are left unattended. They breed year-round, and while the male helps with the construction and defense of the nest, the incubation and feeding of the young is largely left to the female.



The distinctive nest of the sugar bird is shaped like a sphere, or some approximation thereof, and has an entrance on the side. They are made primarily of grasses and fine twigs woven together, but also feature white tufts of cotton as well as string and other

manmade materials that the birds are able to find. The sugar bird actually builds two types of nest, one in which they roost at night and one to raise their chicks. The sugar bird is not colonial, but it is not particularly territorial, either. They will defend the territory around their breeding nest.

The next time you see a sugar bird, perhaps you will wonder how such a familiar species can have such an inscrutable past. Did the sugar bird evolve in isolation on an island like Darwin's "finches" in the Galapagos, which are also perhaps descended from

tanagers? How did this tiny creature manage to conquer so much of the hemisphere? If we can unlock its past, will that simply open the door to more mysteries about this familiar bird?



## St. Martin's Smallest Bird

The smallest bird on St. Martin is an amazing animal. It can beat its wings dozens of times per second, allowing it to hover and fly backwards. It is an important pollinator of flowers on the island, and despite its size, it will chase much bigger birds away from a tree where it is feeding. Its iridescent colors are created by microscopic structures in its feathers that act like prisms to reflect light.





Of course, this bird is the Antillean Crested Hummingbird. Found only from Eastern Puerto Rico to the Lesser Antilles, this bird is what may be called a restricted range species, not limited to a single island, but also not found beyond a relatively small regional distribution. It is one of two hummingbirds found on St. Martin, both of which are dark in color with patches of iridescent green that reflect like jewels in the sunlight.

Aside from its small size, the Antillean Crested Hummingbird can be differentiated from the only other hummingbird species on St. Martin by its short, straight bill. Males have a crest of iridescent green feathers on the top of their head, and females have a light gray breast. They are found on the island year-round, and build tiny nests on tree branches.

Hummingbirds feed on nectar, and due to their small size and high metabolism, need to eat very frequently to maintain their energy. Because of this, they can be very vulnerable to any disruptions to their food supply. The birds themselves can survive hurricanes by hiding in vegetation and holding tightly to a branch, but if all the flowers are destroyed in the storm, they may starve before new flowers bloom.





If you would like to see the Antillean Crested Hummingbird, one great way is to keep a hummingbird feeder in your yard or on your balcony. Hummingbird feeders are inexpensive and easy to maintain. You can even find instructions online to make your own hummingbird feeder by reusing plastic containers. It's a great way to see these amazing little birds all year, and if you keep your hummingbird feeder stocked during times of drought or after a hurricane, you just might help save a life or two!





# The American Kestrel: Our Familiar Falcon

If you see a small falcon riding the wind over a grassy field or surveying the landscape from a high perch, it is probably the American Kestrel. Visitors from the United States might call this bird a Sparrow Hawk, but here on St. Martin, it is the Killy-killy, named after the call it makes. Whatever the name, it is a petite but beautiful falcon that can be seen all around the island.

This kestrel is the smallest of the North American falcons. It has a light underside speckled with dark spots, and a rich reddish-brown back spotted with black. Males and females have different coloration: males have gray-blue wings and while those of the female are rusty brown. Both have a thin, dark stripe that comes down from the base of their bill, sometimes known as a mustache. They are smaller than the other birds of prey that can be seen on the island from time to time and easily distinguished by their coloration.

These hunters feed on prey like lizards, mice and grasshoppers, often staking out vantage points where they can survey an open area from their perch. When the conditions allow, they may also use the wind to hover over a promising hunting ground, swooping down when they spot their next meal. These habits make them easy to find, as they may often be seen on telephone poles, tree-tops, tall cacti or even the towering flower stalks of agave plants.





The kestrel lives on St. Martin year-round, and our local population belongs to the Caribbean subspecies *caribaeorum*. They nest in cavities, but do not make the cavities themselves. They may use the hollows of trees or even a convenient space in the roof of a porch or an abandoned building. They lay four or five eggs at a time, and may breed multiple times per year. Their prolific breeding may be one reason why they are the only common bird of prey on the island.

Another reason for the continued success of the Killy-killy may be its willingness to live around humans and take advantage of some of the changes we have made to the landscape. Fields and lawns kept trim by goats, cattle or riding mowers allow them to spot prey more easily, and power lines and other human structures are excellent lookout perches. They are also much too small to prey on chickens or other domesticated animals, which spared them from being hunted like the Red-tailed Hawk.

Of course, don't be fooled by their tiny size and pretty plumage, they are deadly hunters with sharp beaks and claws. Their vision is sharp and their eyes are always scanning for their next meal. They are often used by falconers as trained hunters, particularly novices learning falconry. Or just ask any local lizard.





# The Carib Grackle Found a Home on St. Martin

The Carib Grackle, also known as the Lesser Antillean Grackle, or locally as the blackbird, is a common sight on St. Martin today. They can be found in towns and fields and on our beaches. If they are nearby, they are hard to miss. They chatter loudly with a variety of songs and are generally unafraid to be around people. In fact, they are often known to zip in and nab crumbs and other table scraps.

The Carib Grackle is found throughout the Lesser Antilles and parts of northern South America. Within this range it is often quite common. There are a number of different subspecies, and ours is called *Quiscalus lugubris guadalupensis* and is found in the northern islands of the Lesser Antilles. The male Carib Grackle is a shiny black, while females and juveniles are typically brown with gray bellies.





These birds primarily feed on insects, although they will also eat small lizards and gladly partake in leftovers of human meals. They are often found in groups and tend to nest in small colonies, with several nests sharing the same tree. On some islands, they are common throughout the island, while on others they may be locally common, but absent from many areas. We currently don't have a good explanation of why this is true.

For a Caribbean species that is so common and noticeable today, it is astounding to realize that they were not recorded on St. Martin until the early 1970s. They were first seen on the island in 1972 by Bond, James Bond. Although he wasn't here on a top-secret mission for the secret service, Dr. James Bond was a prominent Caribbean ornithologist, and Ian Fleming's agent 007 was named after him.

Additional sightings were made in 1973, 1974 and 1975 by Andries Hoogerwerf. Almost all of the sightings were near Marigot, with just a few sightings in other parts of the island. The grackle was not present in any earlier records by naturalists or ornithologists, so it seems likely that it was either not present, or perhaps rare and locally restricted. No one is sure whether it was introduced, or arrived to St. Martin on its own from islands further south.

However it came originally, it would seem that the grackle has flourished on St. Martin. It can be seen all over the island, often in large numbers. Because it is comfortable in urban areas, perhaps the rapid development of St. Martin helped it become established by making large parts of the island less hospitable to species that prefer to avoid humans. Whatever the reason, we are now able to enjoy the antics of this regional endemic. The next time you see them chattering in the trees around you, pause to wonder how they came here and what the island might have been like before they arrived.







## Additional Endemics

A. **Green-throated Carib** (*Eulampis holosericeus*)  
Species endemic to Lesser Antilles, Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico

B. **Black-faced Grassquit** (*Tiaris bicolor*) (female left)  
Species primarily Caribbean, northern South America

C. **Zenaida Dove** (*Zenaida aurita aurita*)  
Species endemic to Caribbean, subspecies to Lesser Antilles

D. **Caribbean Elaenia** (*Elaenia martinica*)  
Species endemic to Caribbean and coastal Central America

E. **Lesser Antillean Bullfinch** (*Loxigilla noctis*)  
(female left) Species endemic to Lesser Antilles and Virgin Islands

F. **Yellow Warbler** or **Mangrove Warbler** (*Setophaga petechia bartholemica*)  
Subspecies endemic to Northern Lesser Antilles



# About This Book

The introduction and species overviews in this book are adapted from *Bird Watch SXM* articles originally published in ***The Daily Herald's Weekender*** section. Special thanks to ***The Daily Herald*** for permission to republish them, to Lisa Burnett, editor of the *Weekender*, and to Jennifer Yerkes for reviewing the text of this book.

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